



## City of Needles, California Request for City Council Action

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☒ CITY COUNCIL ☐ NPUA

☒ Regular ☐ Special

**Meeting Date:** October 14, 2025

**Title:** Direction to Submit Non-Binding Notice of Intent to Propose – California Welcome Center Certification

**Background:** In 2021, the City of Needles entered into a Professional Services Agreement with the Needles Chamber of Commerce, designating the Chamber as the preferred service provider to operate the City's Visitor Center. Under this five-year agreement (expiring April 21, 2026, with eight mutually agreeable three-year extension options), the City provides a fixed annual payment of \$24,000 to support Visitor Center operations.

As part of the original partnership, the Chamber invested approximately \$176,000 in tenant improvements to the Visitor Center portion of the historic El Garces to create a welcoming and functional space for travelers. The Chamber currently:

- Tracks and reports monthly visitor foot traffic,
- Maintains a visitor email contact list,
- Responds to phone inquiries and in-person questions, and
- Acts as the primary community resource hub for travelers and residents.

At the previous City Council meeting Councilmember Tona Belt directed staff to agendize a discussion on elevating the existing Visitor Center by seeking certification as an official California Welcome Center (CWC). CWCs are part of a statewide network operated by Visit California, connecting travelers to local businesses, attractions, and experiences while encouraging longer stays and increased visitor spending. This step would rebrand and integrate the current center into the statewide program rather than building a new facility.

Key benefits of becoming a CWC include:

- Proven visitor impact: A 2025 Visitor Impact Study found 39% of visitors spent more time locally, 29% visited featured attractions, and 10% extended their stay by an average of 1.6 nights after visiting a CWC.
- Statewide marketing reach: CWCs receive premium placement in the *California Visitor's Guide*, *California Road Trips*, and on VisitCalifornia.com (1M+ monthly visitors) with ad values exceeding \$275,000.
- Highway signage: Caltrans provides official freeway and directional signage to draw travelers off major routes.
- Network credibility: CWC branding builds trust with travelers and strengthens tourism marketing efforts

Visit California's current Request for Proposals (RFP) sets the following timeline:

| Milestone                                                     | Date                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Written Questions & Notice of Intent to Propose (non-binding) | October 14, 2025        |
| Question & Answer Summary E-mailed                            | October 23, 2025        |
| Full Proposal Due                                             | November 4, 2025        |
| Evaluation & Scoring by Committee                             | December 2025           |
| Site Visits for Finalists                                     | January / February 2026 |

Purpose of this agenda item: To obtain City Council direction on whether staff should submit the non-binding Notice of Intent to Propose and return on October 28, 2025, with a finalized operating plan and fiscal commitments before submitting the full application.

**Fiscal Impact:** Since the City already operates a visitor center, the cost to pursue certification is primarily branding and marketing integration, not construction. The existing \$24,000 annual payment to the Chamber of Commerce may increase as the Chamber evaluates the staffing cost of opening the center seven days per week, as expected under the CWC model. The Chamber is currently preparing an updated cost proposal to reflect this change.

Estimated additional costs for certification include:

- Application Fee (one-time): \$1,000 (non-refundable)
- Welcome Package (required signage, branded furnishings, displays): \$9,000
- Annual Membership Dues: \$5,000 (access to statewide marketing & promotions)
- Caltrans Freeway Signage: ≈ \$7,000 (directional & wayfinding)

Operating Hours: Visit California does not mandate a minimum number of hours. For Needles, staff proposes maintaining reasonable hours that mirror the surrounding downtown businesses schedule. Expanding to seven days per week will increase labor needs; the Chamber will provide an updated cost estimate to support the final fiscal plan.

Performance Tracking: The Chamber already tracks monthly visitor counts and related engagement metrics. Chamber staff will expand this to include referral tracking and quarterly reporting to Council to demonstrate local impact.

The program also encourages local business sponsorships and partnerships to offset ongoing costs and help keep the center financially self-sustaining.

**Recommended Action:** Provide staff direction to:

1. Submit the non-binding Notice of Intent to Propose to Visit California for California Welcome Center certification; and
2. Return to City Council on October 28, 2025 with a finalized operating plan and fiscal commitments for consideration before submitting the full application due November 4, 2025.

**Submitted By:** Patrick Martinez, City Manager (at the request of Councilmember Tona Belt)

**City Manager Approval:** Patrick J. Martinez

Date: 10/9/2025

**Other Department Approval (when required):** Jill Taura

Date: 10/10/2025